

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS
HUNTING SEASON / QUOTA CHANGE SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Species: White-tailed Deer

Region: 3

Hunting District: 320, 322, 324, 325, 326, and 330

Year: 2020

- 1. Describe the proposed season / quotas changes and provide a summary of prior history (i.e., prior history of permits, season types, etc.). REMEMBER THIS STEP IS TO BE ACCOMPLISHED BY THE INITIAL ENTRY INTO THE DATABASE—SO FOLKS CAN START THIS NARRATIVE WITH #2 BELOW.**

The recommendation is to extend the ongoing white-tailed deer hunting season through February 15 across the following deer/elk hunting districts and hunting district portions:

- Hunting District 320—Those portions within the Jefferson River Watershed. Those portions within the Madison River watershed would be excluded;
- Hunting District 322—All;
- Hunting District 324—All;
- Hunting District 325—Those portions within the Blacktail Deer Creek Watershed. Those portions within the Beaverhead River Watershed south of Barretts would be excluded;
- Hunting District 326—All; and
- Hunting District 330—Those portions within the Ruby River Watershed. Those portions within the Madison River Watershed would be excluded (Figure 1).

The proposal is for the general deer license to remain valid for either-sex white-tailed harvest and the 003-00 and 399-00 B-licenses to remain valid for antlerless white-tailed harvest. The hunting season in these hunting districts has been general license either-sex for more that ten years. The 003-00 antlerless B-license is valid across each of these districts. Since 2017, the 399-00 antlerless white-tailed deer B-License has been valid across each of these hunting districts. During 2017—2019, the per-hunter annual quota for 399-00 B-licenses was three. In 2020, the per-hunter quota was increased to five.

- 2. What is the objective of this proposed change? This could be a specific harvest amount or resulting population level or number of game damage complaints, etc.**

The objectives of the proposed season extension are:

1. Continue harvesting white-tailed deer and testing for Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) as part of ongoing priority CWD surveillance;
2. Continue harvesting white-tailed deer where CWD was detected to reduce CWD prevalence, reduce the likelihood of future increased prevalence, and slow the spatial spread of CWD among white-tailed deer populations;
3. Achieve a harvest level that will measurably reduce existing white-tailed deer populations where CWD currently occurs and where CWD is likely to occur in the future;
4. Reduce white-tailed deer populations and CWD prevalence to levels that can be more effectively managed through general hunting season harvest; and

5. Reduce the probability of CWD spreading to mule deer, elk, and moose populations in proximity to white-tailed deer populations known to be infected with CWD.
6. **How will the success of this proposal be measured? This could be annual game or harvest surveys, game damage complaints, etc.**

Results of the proposed change would be measured through aerial population trend surveys, ground surveys of population vital rates, hunter-harvest data collected during Fish, Wildlife & Parks phone surveys, social and biological data collected at hunter check-stations and monitoring of CWD distribution and prevalence.

7. **What is the current population's status in relation to the management objectives? (i.e., state management objectives from management plan if applicable; provide current and prior years of population survey, harvest, or other pertinent information).**

There are no formal population objectives for white-tailed deer across these hunting districts. Management has aimed to balance sportsmen desire for more deer and access to harvest them with private landowner tolerance of deer consuming agricultural crops and their willingness to allow hunters access to harvest deer.

Structured population trend surveys were established in the Jefferson and Ruby Valleys in 2014. Survey efforts include aerial population trend counts during late-green up of agricultural fields and ground classification of deer following the general rifle season. These data indicate that area white-tailed deer densities vary but populations have trended up since 2015. Surveys show white-tailed deer densities ranging from as low as 10 per-square-mile in the lower portion of the Jefferson Valley to as high as 80 per-square-mile in the lower portion of the Ruby Valley at spring green-up. Late-summer and early-fall densities are believed to be higher due to early-summer fawn pulse. Localized concentrations of white-tailed deer periodically reach several hundred per-square-mile.

From 2004 through 2019, hunters reported harvesting an average of 4,242 (range = 3,628–5,577) white-tailed deer across the 399-00 B-license hunting districts, annually. This level of harvest has proven insufficient to measurably reduce populations.

8. **Provide information related to any weather/habitat factors, public or private land use or resident and nonresident hunting opportunity that have relevance to this change (i.e., habitat security, hunter access, vegetation surveys, weather index, snow conditions, and temperature / precipitation information).**

Most white-tail deer within the proposed season extension area occupy private lands within valleys. A small proportion distribute across adjacent public lands during the snow-free periods of the year. These deer typically migrate into the valleys following initial snowfall. It's anticipated that a high majority of white-tailed deer within the proposed season extension area would be distributed across private lands during the proposed hunt extension period. Access to hunt deer on private lands is attainable to hunters that properly pursue permission. Most private landowners issue permission to a limited number of hunters at any time for safety reasons and because this approach is believed to facilitate greater deer harvest per day. Thus, it is

hypothesized that a level of deer harvest that would result in effective population reduction will require greater than 37 days of rifle hunting.

CWD was detected among white-tailed deer in the Ruby Valley in 2019. These deer are contiguous with white-tailed deer and moose throughout the Ruby, Jefferson, Beaverhead, and Big Hole valleys. They are seasonally connected to migratory populations of elk, moose, and mule deer that occupy adjacent upland habitats.

As of November 20, 2020, surveillance of hunter-harvested white-tailed deer suggests prevalence of: 8.3% (N = 30) in Hunting District 320; 21.8% (N = 226) in Hunting District 322, 0% in Hunting Districts 324 (N = 2) and 325 (N = 19); and 40% (N = 5) in Hunting District 326. Surveillance suggests CWD prevalence may be as high as 50% in a localized portion of Hunting District 322 where approximately 2,000 white-tailed deer are routinely counted at spring green-up. Because of high densities and contiguous distribution of white-tailed deer within these areas, CWD is expected to occur in areas it currently doesn't soon. Without substantial reductions of white-tailed deer population and CWD prevalence, CWD is expected to transmit to adjacent populations of mule deer, elk, and moose soon.

Given current white-tailed deer density and the presence of CWD, substantial reduction of white-tailed deer density within these areas should be pursued. Future population management will need to be adaptive relative to CWD prevalence.

9. Briefly describe the contacts you have made with individual sportsmen or landowners, public groups or organizations regarding this proposal and indicate their comments (both pro and con).

Because of the evolving nature of CWD detection and the need to act in a timely manner, the proposal has been discussed with a relatively small number of area landowners, sportsmen, and game wardens. All sportsmen and landowners consulted were supportive of extending the hunting 2020 hunting season. Two landowners that control most of the lower Ruby Valley, where CWD occurs at relatively high prevalence and white-tailed deer densities are the highest, are supportive of continued hunting. The proposal may cause concern by some hunters and landowners where white-tailed deer populations remain relatively low. Within the proposed season extension, individual landowners will maintain the ability to deny hunter access where they feel harvest is not necessary. Some hunters that desire more white-tailed deer may be opposed. Given high populations, chronic game damage, hunter interest in white-tailed deer harvest, and recent CWD surveillance results, the proposal is expected to be supported or accepted by most hunters and landowners.

Submitted by:

Date: Dean J. Waltee 11/21/2020

Approved:

Regional Supervisor / Date

Disapproved / Modified by:

Name / Date

Reason for Modification:

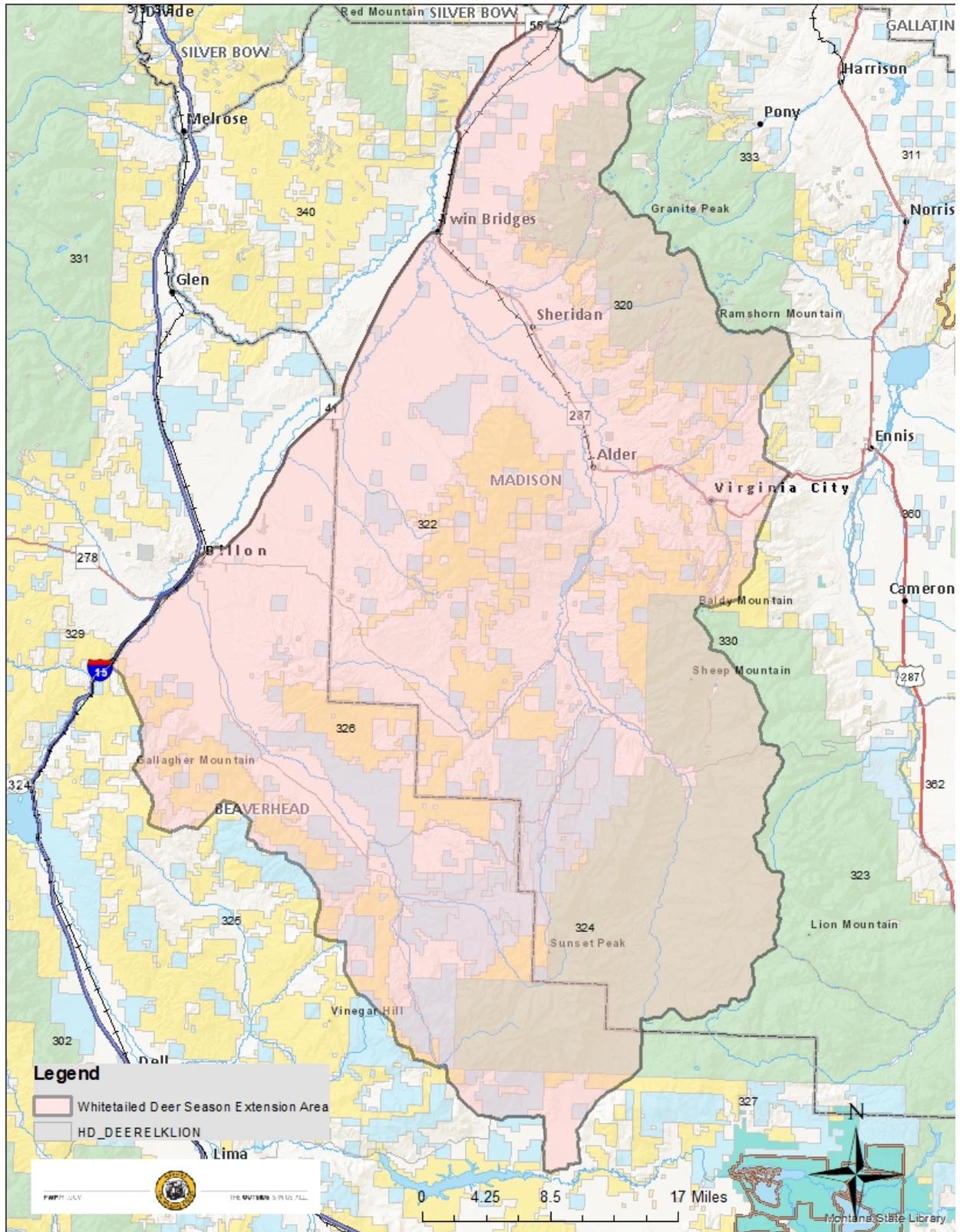


Figure 1. Proposed white-tailed deer season extension area.